

Ode¹ on a Grecian Urn²
by: John Keats

Thou still unravish'd³ bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child⁴ of silence and slow time,
Sylvan⁵ historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme⁶:
What leaf-fring'd⁷ legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities⁸ or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe⁹ or the dales of Arcady¹⁰?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth¹¹?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels¹²? What wild ecstasy¹³?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd¹⁴,
Pipe to the spirit ditties¹⁵ of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold¹⁶ Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Ah, happy, happy boughs¹⁷! that cannot shed¹⁸
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu¹⁹;
And, happy melodist, unwearied²⁰,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting²¹, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd²²,
A burning forehead, and a parching²³ tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar²⁴, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer²⁵ lowing²⁶ at the skies,
And all her silken flanks²⁷ with garlands²⁸ drest²⁹?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn³⁰?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

O Attic shape³¹! Fair attitude³²! with brede³³
Of marble men and maidens overwrought³⁴,
With forest branches and the trodden weed³⁵;
Thou, silent form, dost tease³⁶ us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral³⁷!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe³⁸
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"--that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

¹ a poem or song written in order to praise a person or thing.

² pot

³ unchanged, uncorrupted

⁴ a young child

⁵ refers to woods or forests =rural

⁶ Our poem or poetry

⁷ framed with leaves

⁸ Gods or humans

⁹ Tempe is a valley in Greece that is favored by Apollo, the god of poetry and music.

¹⁰ a wonderful region in the south of Greece where inhabitants live with no worries or problems.

¹¹ Old use of "loath" = reluctant = unwilling to do something.

¹² Musical instruments

¹³ Extreme happiness

¹⁴ wonderful

¹⁵ Spirit songs

¹⁶ brave

¹⁷ Branches (addressing the trees)

¹⁸ Get rid of

¹⁹ You'll never say goodbye to the spring.

²⁰ patient

²¹ existing

²² Annoying

²³ dry

²⁴ a religious table for ceremonies

²⁵ Young cow

²⁶ mooing

²⁷ side

²⁸ Ring of flowers

²⁹ The young cow is dressed with silk and flowers on both sides

³⁰ Morning

³¹ region in east-central ancient Greece.

³² good looking

³³ Like a braid of hair

³⁴ Complicated

³⁵ hard plants

³⁶ doth tease = release our thought

³⁷ Cold Pastoral =Good country scene

³⁸ suffering

ANALYSIS

Type of Work:

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a romantic ode, and a highly lyrical (emotional) poem in which the author speaks to a person or thing absent or present. In this famous ode, Keats addresses the urn and the images on it.

Structure and Meter:

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" consists of five stanzas. Each stanza has ten lines written in iambic pentameter. The first syllable is unaccented, the second accented, the third unaccented, the fourth accented, and so on. Note, for example, the accent pattern of the first two lines of the poem.

thou STILL.. | ..un RA.. | ..vished BRIDE.. | ..of QUI.. | ..et NESS,
thou FOS.. | ..ter CHILD.. | ..of SI.. | ..lence AND.. | ..slow TIME

Notice that each line has ten syllables, five unaccented ones and five accented ones. The purpose of this stress pattern is to give the poem rhythm that pleases the ear.

SUMMARY

Stanza 1:

Keats described the urn as unchangeable because it has existed for centuries without changes as it sits quietly on a shelf or table. It is also like a quiet child because it has been silent through time. In addition, Keats says that we can have some information about history from the urn because it records a rural scene from long ago. The urn tells a story with its images better than Keats does with his pen. Remember a picture worth one thousand words.

Stanza 2:

Keats praises the silent music coming from the pipes as far more pleasing than the audible music of real life, for the music from the urn is for the spirit. Keats says the young lover can never embrace the maiden next to him even though he is so close to her. However, Keats says, the young man should not be sad, for his lady love will remain beautiful forever, and their love –though unfulfilled – will continue forever.

Stanza 3:

Keats addresses the trees, calling them "happy, happy" because they will never lose their leaves, and then addresses the young piper, calling him "happy melodist" because his songs will continue forever. In addition, the young man's love for the maiden will remain forever. In contrast, Keats says, the love between a man and a woman in the real world is imperfect, bringing pain and sorrow and desire that cannot be fully completed.

Stanza 4:

Keats asks about the images of people near the religious table to sacrifice a cow. Do these simple folk come from a little town on a river? Wherever the town is, it will be forever empty, for all of its people are here participating in the festivities on the urn.

Stanza 5:

Keats begins by addressing the urn as an "attic shape". Attic refers to Attica, a region of east-central ancient Greece in which Athens was the chief city.

FIGURES OF SPEECH

Apostrophe:

when Keats addresses the urn as "Thou," "bride," "foster-child," and "historian".

Metaphor (in the form of Personification):

In speaking to the urn this way, he implies that it is a human. Keats also addresses the trees as persons in the third stanza and continues to address the urn as a person in the fifth stanza.

Assonance:

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time.

Alliteration:

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time, / Sylvan historian, who canst thus express.

Anaphora:

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

Paradox:

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? (The images move even though they are fixed in marble).

Oxymoron:

those [melodies] unheard.

peaceful citadel (citadel: fortress occupied by soldiers).

Main Theme:

A main theme of Keats' Ode to a Grecian Urn is how looking at the art of a lost era puts us in touch with how people thought and felt in times now long gone.

There is a generalisation of this idea in the last lines:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty,

Keats seems to be saying that although people and cities and even civilizations all die, the beauty that they create lives after them - and achieves a sort of permanence.

Keats was very concerned with what - if anything - of a human life survives death. His mother had died of tuberculosis in 1810, and his brother in 1818. Keats had also seen much illness and early death in his work as an apprentice surgeon. And Keats himself would die young of tuberculosis, though in 1818 he probably didn't know that yet.

"Ode on a Grecian Urn" is a poem written by the English Romantic poet John Keats. He was one of the main figures of the second generation of Romantic poets. Although his poems were not generally well received by critics during his life, his reputation grew after his death. The poetry of Keats is characterized by sensual imagery. The poem divided into ten-line stanzas (total 50 lines), metered in iambic pentameter. It's divided into a two part rhyme scheme, the first seven lines of each stanza follow an ABABCDE rhyme scheme, but the last three lines are variable. In stanza one, lines seven through ten are rhymed DCE; in stanza two, CED; in stanzas three and four, CDE; and in stanza five, DCE, just as in stanza one.

In the first stanza, the speaker stands before an ancient Grecian urn and addresses it. He is preoccupied with its depiction of pictures frozen in time. It is the "still unravish'd bride of quietness," the "foster-child of silence and slow time." He also describes the urn as a "historian" that can tell a story. He wonders about the figures on the side of the urn and asks what legend they depict and from where they come. He looks at a picture that seems to depict a group of men pursuing a group of women and wonders what their story could be: "What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape? / What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?"

In the second stanza, the speaker looks at another picture on the urn, this time of a young man playing a pipe, lying with his lover beneath a glade of trees. The speaker says that the piper's "unheard" melodies are sweeter than mortal melodies because they are unaffected by time. He tells the youth that, though he can never kiss his lover because he is frozen in time, he should not grieve, because her beauty will never fade.

In the third stanza, he looks at the trees surrounding the lovers and feels happy that they will never shed their leaves. He is happy for the piper because his songs will be "for ever new," and happy that the love of the boy and the girl will last forever, unlike mortal love, which lapses into "breathing human passion" and eventually vanishes, leaving behind only a "burning forehead, and a parching tongue."

In the fourth stanza, the speaker examines another picture on the urn, this one of a group of villagers leading a heifer to be sacrificed. He wonders where they are going ("To what green altar, O mysterious priest...") and from where they have come. He imagines their little town, empty of all its citizens, and tells it that its streets will "for evermore" be silent, for those who have left it, frozen on the urn, will never return.

The Fifth Stanza, Keats talks to the urn again. In case you missed it, that stuff on the urn will always be there. You, me - we're all going to die, and we're all going to be forgotten. But the urn is forever. There will be other people in the future who will look at the urn and maybe will talk to the urn. The urn is forever, and kind of by extension here, art is forever. Art freezes things in place, including, maybe, this poem that we're reading, because Keats is dead and we're still looking at it.